

TOURISM, TRAVELS & TALES

Spring 2020 HARRISON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Five Towns, a Railroad and One Man –

Renea Anderson, Harrison County Tourism



John I. Blair, for most when you hear the name it has no significance. But as Harrison County's history goes that couldn't be farther from the truth. He was born in 1802 in New Jersey and came from Scotch-Irish ancestry.

He had a very entrepreneurial spirit and owned numerous successful businesses and added to them throughout his life. From grocery stores and grist mills to banks and railroad ventures, his business prowess made him a very affluent man of his era. He was even one of the delegates to the Chicago Convention that nominated Lincoln!

His interest in railways was spurred, no pun intended, by the Iowa Legislature when in July of 1856 it granted land to be used by the Air Line Railway company for railroad expansion throughout the State. Then in 1860 the Iowa Legislature changed the land grant from the Air Line to the Cedar Rapids and Missouri River Railroad. The work done west of Marshalltown was all completed under Blair's competent direction. By 1867, Blair had literally worked his way across Iowa and in January of that year his mastery of business, varied resources and management of workers led to the completion of the line to Council Bluffs.

Over the years as several railroads merged and names changed, Blair became associated with the Chicago and Northwestern Railway Company. In 1866 - 1868 he platted five towns in Harrison County as follows:

Woodbine—December 5, 1866, on section 14-80-42

Missouri Valley— January 28, 1867, on section 15-78-44

Dunlap— June 26, 1867, on section 3-81-41

River Sioux (old town) — September 10, 1868, on section 23-81-45

Mondamin— September 10, 1868, on section 30-80-44 & section 25-80-45

While he didn't linger for long in the area, John Insley Blair has had an immeasurable impact on the history, growth and development of Harrison County. So the next time you see a train, hear it's whistle or drive through one of the communities he platted, think of the young Scotch-Irish boy and his dreams of success that have had such influence on us all.*

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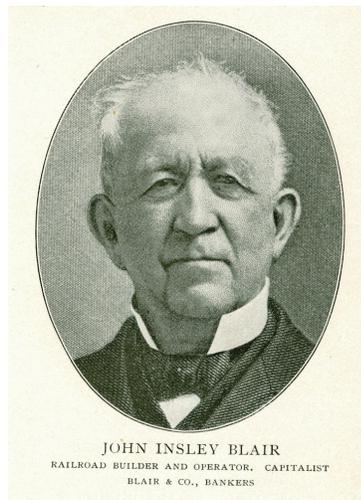
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For more information or to join, call the Harrison County Historical Village and Welcome Center at:
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JOHN INSLEY BLAIR
RAILROAD BUILDER AND OPERATOR, CAPITALIST
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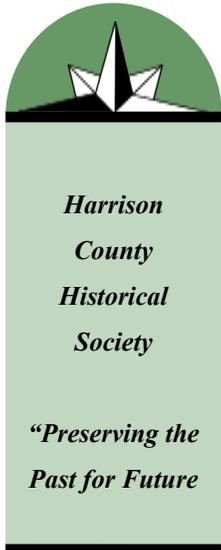
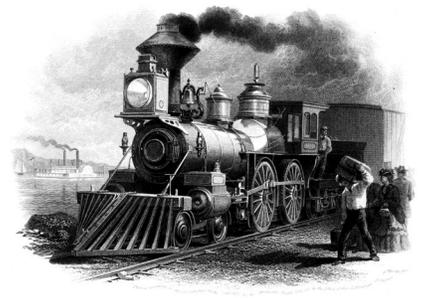
* Source: The Annals of Iowa
Vol 11 Number 7 (1914)

Iowa Rail History—According to the Iowa Department of Transportation

Railroad transportation came to Iowa in the late 1840s. Iowa had approximately 655 miles of track in operation by 1860 and 2,683 miles by 1870. This mileage grew to almost 9,200 at the turn of the century (1900) and peaked between 1911 and 1917 with more than 10,500 roadway miles of track. Although there were several very small railroads operating in and around Iowa's river towns, the first railroad to cross the Mississippi River was the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad in 1856. This railroad later became known as the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad. The Rock Island filed for bankruptcy in 1975 and ordered to liquidate by the bankruptcy court in June 1980. Much of the former Rock Island system in Iowa was acquired by the former Chicago and North Western Railway Co. The former Rock Island main line across Iowa from Chicago to Davenport to Council Bluffs and Omaha is now operated by the Iowa Interstate Railroad.

In 1867 the Chicago, Iowa and Nebraska Railroad, which later became the Chicago and North Western Railway Co. was the first railroad to build tracks across Iowa. The Chicago and North Western Railway Co. merged with the Union Pacific Railroad Co. in April 1995. The Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad Co. (now known as the BNSF Railway Co.) and the Illinois Central Railroad Co., which later became the Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Co. both completed their rail lines across Iowa in 1878. (In December 1985 the Illinois Central Gulf Railroad sold all of its Iowa trackage to the Chicago, Central and Pacific Railroad Co. and in January 1996 got back all that trackage by acquiring the Chicago, Central and Pacific Railroad Co.) (Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Co. changed its name back to Illinois Central Railroad Co. in 1988). In 1874, the Milwaukee and Mississippi Railroad Co. became the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Co. and, also in 1878, became the fifth railroad to complete its tracks across Iowa. The Milwaukee filed bankruptcy late in 1976 and was split into two parts: the "operating core" and the "non-operating core". Early in 1986 the Milwaukee "operating core" was acquired and merged into the SOO Line Railroad Co., a subsidiary of the CP Rail system formerly known as the Canadian Pacific Co.. The "non-operating core" was liquidated. Iowa's rail system has experienced extensive change and restructuring since 1975 as a result of railroad bankruptcies and rail line abandonments.

As of Dec. 31, 2001, Iowa has permanently lost approximately 6,595 miles of track since the peak years of 1911 to 1917. Of these about 3,800 miles were lost after 1974. The bankruptcies of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad and the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad in the mid-1970s caused the state to lose a significant amount of trackage and service. Today, Iowa has only 3,905 miles of roadway track in operation. In 2012, Iowa is served by five Class I railroads: the BNSF Railway Co., CN, Canadian Pacific Railway, the Norfolk & Southern Railway, and the Union Pacific Railroad; one Class II railroad, the Iowa Interstate Railroad; and 11 Class III railroads: the Appanoose County Community Railroad, the Boone & Scenic Valley Railroad, the Burlington Junction Railway, the CBEC Railway, the Cedar Rapids and Iowa City Railway, the D & I Railroad, the D & W Railroad, the Iowa Northern Railroad, the Iowa Traction Railroad, the Iowa River Railroad, and the Keokuk Junction Railway. These railroads serve five principal gateways or interchange points in the Midwest: Chicago, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Omaha, Kansas City, and St. Louis.



Logan, Iowa Railway Wreck of 1896—Extracted from the 1915 History of Harrison County, Iowa, by Hon. Charles W. Hunt, Logan; published by B. F. Bowen & Co., Inc., page 276.

Transcribed and submitted by Mona Sarratt Knight

On July 11, 1896, occurred one of the most disastrous railway wrecks that ever took place in the state of Iowa. The Union Pacific Pioneers, of Omaha, were holding their annual picnic at Logan on that day, having a special train of their sixteen passenger cars and one baggage car. Towards evening, when they were returning home, a misconstrued train order caused the special to collide with a fast freight train, just around the sharp curve southwest of Logan and about half a mile from the station. The train they met was No. 38, fast freight and return mail coaches, east bound. The excursion train was to wait for No. 2, and the passengers were all occupying their seats. A freight had passed them, which they supposed was the fast freight, but which proved to be another train. The train orders for No. 38 had been overlooked or forgotten by the agent and train crew; hence the awful disaster. W. R. SHAFFER, an old-time agent at Logan, was then stationed at that town.

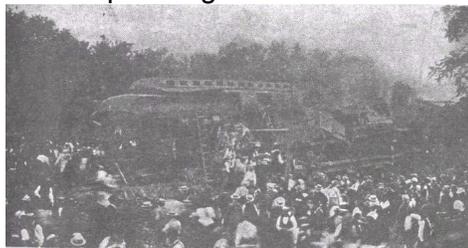
The two trains met full speed, and the result was fearful. The baggage car was driven entirely through the first passenger coach. Several passengers were beheaded and many were badly mutilated. The meeting of the fated trains was plainly seen by John F. SMEADLEY, a farmer living three miles north of Missouri Valley, who was near the curve at the time of the collision. He stated at the inquest: "When I saw the two trains, they must have been fully twenty rods apart. I realized that nothing could prevent a collision. I stood up in my buggy, swung my hat and cried out in an effort to signal the engineers of the two trains. That my signs were not observed is apparent to my mind for the reason that there was no effort made to stop either of the trains, or at least not as far as I could see. I screamed at the top of my voice, but still the two trains moved toward each other. Then I waited. It seemed like an hour. The cold sweat streamed from my face as I stood there waiting for the crash which must have been but a few seconds later. I was but a few rods ahead of the excursion train and not to exceed five hundred feet from the track when the two engines came together."

"The moment the two iron monsters struck was the most trying of all my life. I had served in the Civil War and was in twelve battles, but never did I experience such a feeling as I did when I stood upon the Iowa prairie, knowing that in a very short time scores, and perhaps hundreds, of brave men, dedicated women and innocent children would be killed, and that no power could prevent the catastrophe. At last the end came and that strange spell passed from me."

"As the two trains continued toward each other, there was a dull, heavy shock that seemed like the rumbling of distant thunder. This was followed by a hissing sound and in an instant the two engines and the front car of each train became enveloped in clouds of steam, completely obscuring them from view. Soon the clouds cleared away, and as it did, I saw the engine of the freight train climbing on top of the one attached to the excursion train. Behind the engine of the excursion train there seemed to be cars crowding and pressing together. The floors of the baggage car seemed to rise almost at the same instant it struck the body of the coach immediately behind. As the floor struck, it plowed into the coach, just above the windows and continued on in its course until it reached within a few feet of the rear end, when it seemed to waver, topple and then settle down upon the coach, crushing it to what seemed to be but a mass of kindling wood. As the noise of crashing timbers subsided, there arose upon the air the cries of men, women and children, mingled with groans of the maimed and dying."

There were forty-two maimed for life and twenty-five killed outright. The rescue work commenced within ten minutes after the wreck occurred. The sides of the passenger coaches were broken in and the work of taking out the dead and injured begun.

Photo of the Logan Train
Wreck of 1896



**THE HARRISON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY IS
LOOKING FOR NEW MEMBERS!**

The Harrison County Historical Society works to ensure local lore and heritage are preserved for future generations. This endeavor is of the utmost important to protect historical items, buildings, first-account recollections of the past, and many other significant endeavors.

Preserving history is like reading a real map; to understand where you are going, you need to know where you've been. The Historical Society hopes you will consider joining them on their journey. The membership year begins July first each year; new members are, of course, gladly welcomed at any time during the year.

Life members and those choosing the gold, silver, or bronze levels never need to pay membership dues. With your membership comes a quarterly newsletter and other benefits; please see below for the list of benefits at each donor level.

Membership Options:

Gold Membership (1 time fee) \$200

Benefits include name plate recognition on the Historical Society Register, free admission to Historical Society activities, a recognition certificate, and the quarterly newsletter.

Silver Membership (1 time fee) \$100

Benefits include name plate recognition on the Historical Society Register, half-off admissions to Historical Society activities, a recognition certificate, and the quarterly newsletter.

Bronze Membership (1 time fee) \$50

Benefits include name plate recognition on the Historical Society Register, discounted admission to Historical Society activities, and the quarterly newsletter.

Annual Member (yearly fee) \$10

Each annual member receives the quarterly newsletter.)

Remit payment to:

Harrison County Historical Society
c/o Mary Zahner
1454 260th St.
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